West Nile Virus in Animals

What is the West Nile Virus?

West Nile virus is an arborvirus (short for arthropod-borne virus) that causes encephalitis (inflammation of the brain). The West Nile virus was first identified in Africa, Eastern Europe, West Asia, the Middle East and the United States.

Who gets it?

The virus is most commonly found in horses, birds and people. It can infect various other wild and domestic animals

How is it spread?

West Nile virus is transmitted by blood-feeding insects such as mosquitos. The mosquito transmits the virus by drawing blood from the infected animal than biting another animal. West Nile virus is not spread directly from man to animal, animal to man, or animal-animal. The virus requires a "vector", in this case a mosquito to transmit the virus from one to another to another.

What are the symptoms?

For horses: weakness, usually in hindquarters.

For dogs and cats: no clinical signs have been clearly reported but if a pet shows signs of fever, depression, in-coordination, muscle weakness, seizure or paralysis, a veterinarian should examine the animal. These symptoms could represent infection with the distemper virus, rabies and other infectious diseases.

How do you diagnose it?

A veterinarian would draw blood and do a test to confirm exposure to the disease. Some will tests will show positive for exposure but the animal will not show clinical signs or debilitation from the disease.
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What is the treatment for animals?

There is currently not a cure for the West Nile virus. Veterinarians will provide generalized supportive care which includes IV fluids and hospitalization.

How do I reduce the risk of exposure?

1) Horses should be vaccinated.
2) Keep your pets indoors when not supervised.
3) Avoid outdoor activity at dusk and dawn or use repellants on yourself but not on your dog or cat.
4) Avoid areas with high mosquitoes.
5) Eliminate standing in stagnant water where mosquitoes might breed.

What is Maricopa County doing about the problem?